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Sakao language

Sakao (also **Nkep** or **Nekep**) is an Oceanic language spoken on the northeast horn of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu.

Contents

Sakao		
Wanohe, Nkep, Nekep		
Native to	Vanuatu	
Region	Big Bay, Espiritu Santo Island	
Native speakers	4,000 (2001)[1]	
Language family	Austronesian	
	• Malayo-Polynesian	
	• Oceanic	
	• Southern Oceanic	
	• Northern Vanuatu	
	• East Santo	
	• **Sakao**	
Dialects	Nkep	
Language codes		
ISO 639-3	sku	
Glottolog	saka1289 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/saka1289)[2]	

Name

Sakao is the name of the language as used by foreigners and linguists. It is named after Sakao Island, an islet off the northeastern shore of Espiritu Santo, almost opposite Port-Olry. (Incidentally, this is not the native name of that island, which is called *Laðhi* by Sakao speakers. The name *sakau* means 'coral reef' in various languages of Vanuatu, but it is unknown exactly which one gave its name to the island.)

The speakers of Sakao refer to their own language using various names, depending on the variety considered.

Dialects

Sakao has undergone considerable phonological change and innovations, which make it utterly unintelligible to its closely related neighbours of Espiritu Santo. Thus for instance, comparing the following words with their cognates in its close relative Tolomako:

	Sakao	Tolomako
"louse"	nøð	na ɣutu
"chicken"	nɔð	na toa
"four"	jɛð	βati
"to blow"	hy	suβi

The main dialects of Sakao are Northern, or Port-Olry dialect, and Southern, or Hog-Harbour dialect. The Southern dialect is the more conservative one. It is characterized by the loss of most pretonic and posttonic vowels, resulting in consonant clusters unusual for an Oceanic language. The Northern dialect is characterized by its extensive use of epenthetic vowels, which have achieved phonemic status, resulting in what looks superficially like vowel harmony; the loss of the initial *n- of nouns, except in monosyllabic nouns (this *n- being a reflex of the common Austronesian article *na, fused to the nouns in Sakao); and the diphthongization of some word-final vowels.

Thus for instance Port-Olry has /œmœɣœɛ/ "fog, mist" where Hog-Harbour has /nmɣœ/.

Unless otherwise indicated, examples given here are in the Northern, Port-Olry, dialect.

Number

Like Tolomako, Sakao distinguishes four numbers for its personal pronouns. However, they are not singular, dual, trial, plural, but singular, dual, paucal, plural. The Sakao paucal derives from the Tolomako trial, thus Tolomako i ɣire-tolu "they three", Sakao jørðœl "they, from three to ten" (ðœl is regularly derivable from tolu). One says in Sakao jørðœl løn "the five of them" which is, etymologically, "they three, five."

Substantives are not inflected for number, except kinship terms which distinguish singular and plural: ðjœɣ "my mother/aunt," rðjœɣ "my aunts;" walðyɣ "my child," raalðyɣ "my children." Likewise all demonstratives (pronouns, adjectives, even locatives): wa "this one," warɨr "these ones;" aðœŋœn mam "this person," aðœŋœn mamɨr "these persons;" ðað "here," ðaðɨr "in several places around here."

Phonology

Sakao vowels (partial)

	front unrounded	**front rounded**	**back rounded**
close	i	y	u
close mid	e	ø	o
open mid	ɛ	œ	ɔ
open	a		ɒ

In addition, Sakao has a close vowel /ɨ/ that is unspecified for being rounded or unrounded, front or back, and is always unstressed. It also has the two diphthongs /œɛ, ɒɔ/, whereas Tolomako has none.

Sakao consonants

	labial	**alveolar**	**palatal**	**velar**	**glottal**
nasal	m	n		ŋ	
plosive	p	t		k	
fricative	β	s ð		ɣ	h
tap		ɾ			
voiceless trill		r̥			
approximant	w	l	j		

In addition, Sakao consonants may be long or short: /œβe/ "drum", /œββe/ "bed"

It is not clear if Sakao even has syllables; that is, whether trying to divide Sakao words into meaningful syllables is even possible. If it is, Sakao syllables would appear to be V (a vowel or diphthong) surrounded by any number of consonants: V /i/ "thou", CCVCCCC (?) /mhɛrtpr/ "having sung and stopped singing thou kept silent" [m- 2nd pers., hɛrt "to sing", -p perfective, -r continuous].

Deixis

Sakao has seven degrees of deixis.

Nouns

Sakao has inalienably possessed nouns, many of which are irregularly inflected:

Sakao	English
œsɨŋœ-ɣ	"my mouth"
œsɨŋœ-m	"thy mouth"
ɔsɨŋɔ-n	"his/her/its mouth"
œsœŋ-...	"...'s mouth"

Sakao	English
uly-ɣ	"my hair"
uly-m	"thy hair"
ulœ-n	"his/her/its hair"
nøl-...	"...'s hair"

Here "mouth" is variably *œsɨŋœ-, ɔsɨŋɔ-, œsœŋ-* and "hair" variably *uly-, ulœ-, nøl-.*

Syntax

Sakao has a suffix *-ɨn* that increases the valence of a verb (corresponding to applicative suffixes in other languages): it makes intransitive verbs transitive, and transitive verbs ditransitive. It the latter case, one argument may be the direct object and the other an instrument; the word order of the arguments is free, leaving context to disambiguate which is which:

> *Mɨjilɨn ara amas.*

mɨ-jil-ɨn	a-ra	a-mas
S/he-hits-TRANS	ART-pig	ART-club

> "He hits (kills) the pig with a club"

This could also be *mɨjilɨn amas ara.*

The Sakao strategy involves polysynthetic syntax, as opposed to the isolating syntax of its neighbor Tolomako. For instance, the word 'pig' above could be incorporated into the verb, leaving a single external argument:

> *Mɨjilrapɨn amas.*

mɨ-jil-ra-p-ɨn	a-mas
s/he-hit-pig-PFV-TRANS	ART-club

Sakao polysynthesis can also involve compound verbs, each with its own instrument or object:

Mɔssɔnɛshɔβrɨn aða ɛðɛ   (or: *ɛðɛ aða*)

mɔ-sɔn-nɛs-hɔβ-r-ɨn	a-ða	ɛ-ðɛ
s/he-shoots-fish-follows-<u>CONT</u>-TRANS	ART-bow	ART-sea

"He kept on walking along the shore shooting fish with a bow."

Here *aða* "the bow" is the instrumental of *sɔn* "to shoot", and *ɛðɛ* "the sea" is the direct object of *hoβ* "to follow", which since they are combined into a single verb, are marked as <u>ditransitive</u> with the suffix -*ɨn*. Because *sɔn* "to shoot" has the <u>incorporated</u> object *nɛs* "fish", the first consonant <u>geminates</u> for *ssɔn*; *ssɔn-nɛs*, being part of one word, then reduces to *ssɔnɛs*.

- <u>Tolomako language</u>, for parallels to the above in a closely related but grammatically simpler language

References

1. <u>Sakao (https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/sku/)</u> at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
2. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). <u>"Wanohe" (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/saka1289)</u>. *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.

- <u>Guy, Jacques Bernard Michel</u> (1972). *A grammar of the northern dialect of Sakao, a Melanesian language of Espiritu Santo (New Hebrides)* (PhD thesis). Australian National University. <u>doi</u>:<u>10.25911/5D73902D1FAAD (https://doi.org/10.25911%2F5D73902D1FAAD)</u>. <u>hdl</u>:<u>1885/130469 (https://hdl.handle.net/1885%2F130469)</u>.
- Guy, Jacques Bernard Michel (1977). "On the origins of the Sakao vowel system (New Hebrides)". *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*. **86** (1): 97–103. <u>JSTOR</u> <u>20705229 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/20705229)</u>.

External links

- ELAR archive of <u>N'kep dialect of Sakao (north Vanuatu): Structure and variation (http://elar.soas.ac.uk/deposit/0229)</u>
- <u>Paradisec</u> has two collections of <u>Arthur Cappell's</u> (<u>AC1 (http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/AC1)</u>, <u>AC2 (http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/AC2)</u>) that include Sakao language materials